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ABSTRACT

Statements on the need of college presidents for extensive preparation in advance of performing their tasks well and of maintaining good relationships with their Boards of Education are presented. Individual topics include: total community picture, image projection, review of presentations, attitude formation, type of audience, and information dissemination. (CK)

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"President-Board Relationships: Building a Bridge of Communication"

by

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July 9, 1973
Summer Workshop for New
Community Junior College
Presidents and Wives

JC 730 164

PRESIDENT - BOARD RELATIONSHIPS:

BUILDING A BRIDGE OF COMMUNICATION

It is a great opportunity for me to speak before you. The title of my presentation, "President-Board Relationships: Building a Bridge of Communication", is indeed significant. However, before we may begin the discussion on such a project...it is important to us to inspect the bridge of communication that exists between fellow presidents. That is why today...and the rest of this seminar...is so important. It is on occasions such as this that community college presidents and administrators may benefit from the successes... and failures of their contemporaries.

At one time or another, we have all been guilty of filling our reports and conversations with glowing accounts of our educational achievements...carefully relegating our less stupendous endeavors to a less visible position. This is truly unfortunate in that some of man's most important progress was achieved by carefully noting what didn't work! When we talk in terms of successful communication... we must, of necessity, talk about the total picture.

I am sorry that I was unable to hear Dr. Fordyce's presentation this morning. I am sure it was outstanding and as thought-provoking as last night.

First of all, I would like to suggest to you that there is a tremendous need to review the total community college picture, its goals, directions, and organization. Interestingly enough there are other people in and out of our field who suggest the same.

Last week I had the opportunity to visit the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in Santa Barbara, and have lunch with Dr. Hutchins and the senior fellow of the Center. Dr. Hutchins, whose comments during the last 4 - 5 decades supplied doctoral candidates with the appropriate quotations for their dissertations, arrived at the conclusion in 1973 that the community college is something to look at as a worthwhile segment of higher education and furthermore, the Center would be interested in devoting time, and effort (not money) to focus in on this topic.

In my opinion this is important and very timely. The idea of free or low-cost quality post-secondary education today permeates the thought that millions of people who would like to obtain education within their available means.

I submit to you that this overriding principle makes our community colleges such a vital force in our nation.

Max Lerner -- scholar, political scientist, and journalist -- spoke on the campus at Kansas City and recounted an experience in Warsaw, Poland, shortly after the publication of his book, America as a Civilization.

One evening the chairman of a meeting Mr. Lerner was attending got up and said, "Mr. Lerner, you have written this big book on American Civilization but we haven't had a chance to have it translated as yet. Could you tell us in a single word what is the essence of American Civilization?"

Mr. Lerner replied, "But this is a book of a thousand pages... you want me to distill a thousand pages into one word?" Mr. Lerner reported that he thought very fast and very hard about this difficult assignment. He asked himself:

is the word freedom,

is it democracy,

is it equality,

is it tolerance,

is it decency,

is it justice,

is it enterprise?

Suddenly the word came to him and he heard himself saying, "The word is access", access is the essence of our American Civilization.

Community colleges provide access to knowledge, access to teachers who instruct and inspire, and access to career choices only a two-year college education make possible.

I sincerely hope that you and your boards will keep this in the right perspective, especially at times when you feel the individual board members would not understand the mission of community colleges in our civilization. No chief executive can ignore the tremendous task of communicating to the board of open-door education.

A prerequisite to effective and efficient communication is the type of image you project to your governing board. When I say image... I am not speaking in terms of the Madison Avenue advertising image. Rather, I am talking about developing a bonafide relationship of mutual trust and respect. Your board will not demonstrate a cooperative spirit if they feel you are being less than honest... nor can they be expected to act on advice that appears less than competent. To be convincing...to achieve your purpose, you must:

1. consistently demonstrate a freedom from special interests...They must trust you; and
2. produce recommendations based on thoroughly researched, comprehensive reports...They must respect you as a professional and as a leader.

We must first realize that communication is not...and cannot be an exact discipline. The process of communication sometimes can be compared with the process of education. Most of you have been classroom instructors at one time or another. You realize that each student is different...and that he will learn most effectively in various modes of study. Your governing board is much the same. Each board member will understand your presentations in varying degrees according to the mode of explanation you employ. In achieving consistently good communication you should follow a pattern of experimentation.

First, review your past presentations. Which of these past communications met with the greatest success? As you appeared before the board, what phrase...what concept...what mode of communication met with the greatest and most positive response? Conversely, what met with the least success. As you write the new presentation... take note of these past experiences. Far too often, we are foolishly consistent in our communication endeavors. We must be aware of the board's reaction...and ready to modify.

Second, after you have made the presentation...inquire of the members of your board what information they felt was most valuable. What should have been amplified...What information should have been supplied that wasn't?

Third, when you return to your office...re-evaluate the presentation. Each board member is viewing your ideas through a different frame of reference. As such, you will have to evaluate the presentation on the basis of what they understood...what they thought was important...what they considered to be the key element. You probably understood the presentation perfectly. In your eyes it was perfectly logical...perhaps even obvious. I have one key piece of advice: DON'T COUNT ON IT. People understand...conceptualize.. according to their past experiences and their present circumstance. Since this is very often different from your own...it is necessary to take time...to step aside...and to view things as the individual board members do.

I am reminded of a failure in communication that I once observed in one of the college's libraries. There was this sign... very neatly printed...hanging on the inside of one of the library's back doors. It read:

EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY

NOT TO BE USED UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE!!

I am sure that the individual who lettered that sign knew exactly what he wanted to say...and although the message was generally understood...its clarity was certainly subject to question.

Another such example exists in the personnel manual of a bureaucracy...which will remain un-named. It is a section regarding resignations. It reads as follows:

> "If an employee should resign while enjoying the benefits of sick leave, there will be a mandatory period of two weeks before the resignation will become final.
>
> If an employee should die while enjoying the benefits of sick leave, then the mandatory two-week period will be waived and the resignation would be considered to be final."

Once again, I am sure that the people writing the requirements of this personnel manual were totally secure as to the effectiveness of their communication. However, such a statement mitigates the seriousness with which an individual will view the rest of the document.

When we are preparing to advocate a particular idea or course of action...there are a number of questions we should ask ourselves as we develop the communication:

1. Why are we making the presentation?
2. Who are we making the presentation to?
3. What are we attempting to communicate?
4. When should we communicate?
5. How should we communicate?

These questions should be carefully considered and applied to each individual situation. The answers to these questions will vary from issue to issue. Allow me to explain:

Why are we making the presentation? ...or perhaps more precisely, what reaction do you wish to evoke from your board? Is it an informative report...or a report for action? It is amazing the number of reports that begin and end with no apparent direction. State the purpose of your communication and lead the board to your conclusion.

Why you are communicating with the board also has to do with the attitude you hold about the board. I have met many college presidents who considered their governing board a sort of opposition. They would communicate with the board only because it was a fiscal necessity. This created tension on both sides and would close effective channels of communication.

College governance by the way is...or should be based on the principle of shared authority. There is no place for anything but complete cooperation and trust. This is the basis of any good partnership agreement. This is the basis of effective communication. It must be realized that the board is responsible for representing the needs of society. They cannot delegate the responsibility for educational policies and practices in terms of society's needs. They are the final authority...and they are the source of whatever authority we exercise. The advice of the board must be accepted graciously...not merely adhered to in a grudging manner.

This leads me to the next question: Who are we making the presentation to? You must begin to view the board as individuals... individuals with different likes and dislikes...varying political philosophies...specialized interests...differing prides and prejudices. What I am really talking about is creating a feeling of empathy. There are some basic principles you should keep in mind, for example:

1. Recognize that every board member has his own personal, unique, individual filter through which he or she perceives reality. It is made up of attitudes, prejudices, and countless experiences.

2. Be willing to allow the board member the right to be himself and to see reality in his own way. This doesn't mean you should necessarily like his point of view - just that you do not insist that the whole board think exactly as you do.

3. Only to the degree that the first two steps have been taken can a president proceed to put himself in the board member's shoes and see how the problem looks from there. Of course this can never be done perfectly because we can never completely set aside our own point of view. But the entire process of communication between the board and the chief executive can only be strengthened and enriched to the degree that those communicating do grasp or understand the various elements of the decision-making process of which they are part of. Empathy does not involve acceptance of the board's viewpoint...but the development of an increased understanding of the way that the board is seeing the situation.

This is the key element in any communication endeavor. You cannot explain...persuade...or otherwise communicate unless you have an understanding of the total board and the individual members' interests, attitudes and character. This is all part of effectively analyzing your board.

The next area with which we must deal demands that we establish WHAT WE ARE ATTEMPTING TO COMMUNICATE. Many presentations fall short in that they do not clearly define the subject matter to be dealt with. There are times when the chief executive...in an effort to be complete...will dump into his presentation every bit of minutia he can dig up. Then so as not to be pushie...won't draw any conclusions or provide any kind of a summary. The effect of these good intentions is usually disaster.

You must provide your board with information from which they can make a viable decision. You must provide the framework and analysis. The board is counting on your expertise...and your recommendations. They do not have the staff or the time to perform your job for you.

There is, of course, the other side of the coin. There is a type of communicator who will provide nothing but his opinion in summary or recommendation form. This too is less than satisfactory. To find the proper balance will require experimentation on your part. Each board...each board member will require something slightly different. Make it your business to find out what those information parameters are. Only then can you display your case most efficiently.

The next question on the agenda: WHEN SHOULD WE COMMUNICATE? Far too often, an attempt is made to communicate with the board only when something is wrong...or when something is needed. At times such as this, the board feels pressured by the immediacy of the claims being made. Under such pressure, personalities flare and a decision will be delayed...or...unwisely made.

This can be avoided simply by keeping the board posted as to your activities. Then if an emergency does occur...the board is likely to feel more cooperative in that they have not been shut-out from the district's activities. Constant communication will also give you the opportunities necessary to find the most efficient communications route.

In multi-unit districts, one of the best ways of keeping the channels open is through your chancellor or superintendent. This individual has constant access to the board members and provides a reliable means of distributing your information. Your chancellor is also a good source of information regarding the board's disposition on any given matter. By informing him you achieve both guidance and effective communication with your board.

The last question you must answer deals with HOW ONE SHOULD COMMUNICATE? In this age of instructional innovation...audio-visual aids...not to mention the xerox copier...I still observe people "lecturing" to the board as if the board were sitting on a log and they were wearing a robe similar to Socrates. Such pre-printing press ideas must be done away with. It should be noted that a person remembers only 15% of what he hears...and 85% of what he sees. THERE IS A MESSAGE HERE!!!!

Back up your presentations with slides, charts, video-tapes, hand-outs, over-head projections, demonstrations...anything that will bring your idea to life. You have the means at your disposal... make use of them.

To make sure I am not accused of not practicing what I preach... I have for you a variety of printed materials from our district: (explain folder)

In summary, in my statements today has been the need for extensive preparation. Yours is a very difficult job...for you must transform the abstract into the real...the idea into the implemented, functioning program.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
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CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGE
INFORMATION

Follow your intuition when constructing the educational programs of the future...but communicate that idea after logically asking yourself:

1. Why am I making this presentation;
2. Who am I making this presentation to;
3. What am I attempting to communicate;
4. When should it be communicated; and
5. How should it be communicated.

The answers to these questions will provide the key to the unfoldment of your educational blueprint.

I will close my presentation with a few quotations from Stuart Marsee, President-Superindent of El Camino College. It sums up many of the "joys" of being a college president...the difficulty of communicating:

If he forms a committee, he can't make decisions; if not he is dictatorial.

If he writes a bulletin, he is trying to hoodwink the faculty; if not, his communications are poor.

If he prints a bulletin, it is a slick publication and an extravagance; if it is mimeographed, it is amateurish. He wonders if it is read in either case.

If he visits classes and committee meetings, he is an intruder; if he doesn't, he is not interested.

If he is popular with the community and the Board, he is a politician; if not, he has poor public relations.

Gentlemen...like so many of your other duties, communication is never an easy task...it is only necessary.